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ELISION IN LATIN AND GREEK

In Four Parts—Part IV

BY H W MAGOUN

The first thing to be done is evidently to stop seeking to make all long syllables alike, since the short ones tend to take care of themselves. Naturally pronounced (obscured), short elided syllables, which are always inclined to be very brief, will then simply fill out the bars and no slurring will be necessary. Long elided syllables will fit in without difficulty on a similar principle, even where they produce a molossus, a foot which is assigned to the hexameter by native authorities. The syllable which follows an elided one is naturally defective in quantity, and the third long either will be or can be made so by correption. A similar principle holds, if the elided syllable ends the foot. Such feet are fairly common in Vergil. Read as the sense requires, with a varying speed of utterance, the poetry of this author becomes majestic and soul inspiring. Held down to a mechanical theory, with the same time value for all short syllables and a like rule for all the long ones, it limps and falters. The poetry is gone, and only a shell remains.

The Sanskrit grammarians were right in classifying vowels as long and short, but syllables as heavy and light (*guru* and *laghu*). That is what they are. In Greek, elided syllables are so light that they may be ignored in the conventional symbols, even as the digamma was ignored in the writing. In Latin, it may be better to represent them. Their value, when short, is approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ (a short being τ), or about one sixth of a second for ordinary speech. This holds good regularly for the hexameter; but such elided syllables may sometimes be treated as shorts in Logaoedics, which were in $\frac{4}{4}$ time, not $\frac{3}{8}$. Of this there is abundant evidence; but it cannot be given

here. Long elided syllables have approximately twice the value of short elided ones.

Elision, then, in both Latin and Greek was in all probability simply a clipped colloquial pronunciation of certain final syllables. It was not a slurring, and it was not a suppression. Both of these hypotheses involve too many difficulties for their acceptance, and they may be regarded as having been sufficiently refuted. When koppa ceased to be distinctly pronounced, the Greeks appear to have stopped writing it. Such a fate certainly overtook digamma long before it ceased to be sounded, as the lines of Homer abundantly show. It would simply be consistent for the Greeks to replace the ordinary symbol, when a vowel became obscure, with an apostrophe to represent the vowel fragment that remained. It would not have been consistent for them to have written an apostrophe, if the vowel had been dropped. Moreover, obscuring, not dropping, is the natural process, as apocope itself shows; for poetic license was plainly involved in apocope. In the older language, as in Sanskrit, an initial short vowel sometimes suffered a similar fate. It received a similar treatment.

In Sanskrit, this latter phenomenon sometimes failed to be represented, as both phenomena did in Greek. The reason is not far to seek. The writer did not feel the obscurity with sufficient force to represent it. That is probably all that there is in the puzzle, and it is enough to explain it. In Latin, no attempt was made to represent the changed pronunciation; but Roman ears were less delicate than Greek and Hindoo ones, and there is no need of speculating further in the matter. They obscured certain final syllables before vowel sounds, and by so doing not only avoided hiatus but also made the syllables in question shorter than they would otherwise have been. The same result will follow to-day, if the syllables are made obscure. Slurring can then be discarded. It will be entirely unnecessary. Cf Quint IX iv 40 and Cic *Or* xlv 150 ff. Notice, however, that contraction is not the same thing as elision; but that the light char-

acter of a Greek elided syllable might almost amount to a case of contraction, and that it might easily be taken for one, as English "the" has been, when not counted as a syllable.

The use of a vowel fragment in place of the proper sound of a final vowel not only satisfied all the requirements of the words *elísio* and *ἀπόστροφος*, but it also makes all elision effective as a means of avoiding hiatus. Such examples then, as those cited above (*μηρί' ἔκη* and *ἀγλά' ἀποινα*) are not exceptions at all. Hiatus is avoided here as elsewhere. The vowel fragment left by elision is sufficient to accomplish the result. In like manner, it becomes clear that where the accent was left acute the vowel fragment was final. It was also final where unusual consonants appear to be so, and slurring need not be resorted to, to escape having a "tau" or other forbidden consonant at the end of a word. Even the seemingly accentless forms probably had a residual accent on the vowel fragment, although it may almost seem to us to be on the preceding (apparently final) consonant. On this basis, the difficulty about proclitics and enclitics disappears, as do all the others mentioned, including a pause after elision. Elision in such a case shortens the time used in pronunciation. It was not necessary on other grounds, although it may have been used sometimes from habit.

If modern Greek usage is referred to, in the matter (Cf Blass *Aussprach des Griech* 3rd ed pp 124-127 and 132), it should be remembered that a great gap separates the modern language from the language of Homer and even from that of Aristotle. No one would be willing to hold the phonetics of modern English to standards of the English of Shakespeare's day, which is still spoken in Ireland, and no one should give undue weight to the usages of modern Greek. They represent a language of different sounds and of a different environment. They are themselves different, in all probability, and represent the finished product of what was merely a tendency in the earlier days. Otherwise, there is no historical development (or degeneration), and the vowels of Homer ought to show the characteristics of modern Greek in all their relations. To assume such a thing is too absurd to need refutation. Modern slurring, then, should not be taken for more than it is worth.

In conclusion, it may be said that many of our ideas of these matters have been based

on a limited knowledge of ancient teachings, not to say on a misinterpretation of them. Conventional rules of the matter-of-fact metrists have been adopted, while the speculations and careful observations of the ancient musicians have either been disregarded or rejected. This is unfair. The truth involves the testimony of both schools, and it will be found to lie between them. They are not really inconsistent, although they may appear to be so. What they need is a sympathetic and careful interpretation, in the light of all the facts.

On this basis, elision must cease to be taken as the suppression of a vowel sound in either Latin or Greek. It must also cease to be regarded as a slurring in either language, such as is used in modern French. Obscuring is all that is left, and it is a simple, natural, and effective solution of all the difficulties. In Greek, the obscuring was doubtless carried further than it was in Latin; but the vanishing point was not reached. It is not necessary to suppose that the Greeks carefully analyzed the matter, or that they clearly recognized the residual vowel fragment. They felt it, and that was enough. They did recognize the presence of an element not found in apocope, and they called that element a 'turned away tone', or a 'turned back tone', representing it by a symbol which took the same name. Cf the names given to the letters of the alphabet. Having done this, they should not be accused of inconsistency, even if they regarded such a form as δ' as a single letter pronounced alone. Modern scholars have gone quite as far in giving to such expressions as "th' eternal" but three syllables. They would not pretend to write the two words as one; and yet they ought be willing to do so, if the number of syllables is correct. Assuredly, the ancient Greeks cannot be held to a higher degree of accuracy than has been demanded of modern scholars, who have often failed to recognize the residual vowel fragment, which is clearly sounded in the expression just given and in others like it.

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